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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [NU](#)
SUBJECT: ORTEGA APPOINTS ANOTHER PSEUDO-MINISTER OF DEFENSE
REF: MANAGUA 0081 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Paul A. Trivelli for reasons 1.4 (b and d)

¶1. (C) Summary: President Ortega recently appointed former spokeswoman for the Nicaraguan Supreme Court Ruth Tapia Roa to the post of Secretary General of the Ministry of Defense "with the rank of minister." Tapia's chief qualifications appear to be her relationship to former Sandinista military officials and connection to First Lady Rosario Murillo. Ministry officials were taken by surprise and are uncertain how Tapia's appointment will influence the Ministry's relationship with the Army and the President. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On May 7, President Ortega appointed Ruth Tapia Roa as Secretary General of the Ministry of Defense "with the rank of Minister." (Note: The Secretary General is normally the third-ranking position after the Minister and Vice Minister. End Note.) Tapia, a former spokeswoman for the Managua Court of Appeals (2005-present) and Supreme Court (2002), is the sister of retired army Colonel Adela Tapia and revolutionary hero Ulises Tapia. She was an officer in the Sandinista Popular Army (EPS) from 1980-83. In 1983, she left to study in France, where she also held a position at the Nicaraguan Embassy in Paris and served as the FSLN representative. Aside from her brief stint in the EPS, contacts report that Tapia has no background in defense and security issues. She is expected to take up her post the week of May 16.

Who is in Charge?
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¶3. (C) Shortly before his January 10 inauguration, Ortega named Dr. Juan Umana, functionary in charge of Nicaragua's demining efforts, as the "special administrator" of the Ministry of Defense and has since that time declined to name a Minister or Vice Minister (reftel). Umana told pol/miloff on May 8 that Tapia's appointment took him by surprise and that he expected to share control of the Ministry with her. He implied that the "rank of minister" designation is a fiction that will allow Ortega to count another female in his cabinet -- but one with no real power. Senior Ministry official Silvio Diaz (protect) later reported that Tapia "will be in charge" and accused Umana of having a "Napoleon Complex" (Umana is short and squat).

¶4. (U) The Liberal president of the National Assembly's Defense and Government Commission, Enrique Quinonez, publicly criticized Ortega following Tapia's appointment, claiming that Ortega's refusal to name a real minister has degraded civilian control over the armed forces. Quinonez commented

that Ortega is very "comfortable" maintaining a direct relationship with the army, but this has undermined the carefully cultivated institutionality of the Ministry of Defense. FSLN deputy Jose Figueroa defended the President's position, saying that Ortega has the right to administer executive branch institutions as he sees fit.

Does it Matter?

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¶5. (C) Publicly, armed forces officials are careful to support the principle of civilian authority, but have quietly resisted any intrusion from or subordination to the Ministry of Defense, jealously guarding a direct relationship with the President. In a recent interview with "Confidencial" following the release of a poll giving the army high scores in public confidence, armed forces chief General Halleslevens confirmed the army's adherence to the Defense White Paper (reftel), but admitted after persistent questioning that President Ortega "has given priorities to other areas of government," referring to the Ministry of Defense. When asked about the army's relationship with the Ministry, Halleslevens commented that Dr. Umana was attending a conference in Geneva with Major General Calderon Vindel.

¶6. (C) A May 9 meeting with OAS demining officials William McDonough and Carlos Orozco provided further insight into Umana and Calderon's interaction at the Geneva conference. McDonough commented that, in contrast to past visits in which Ministry officials took the lead role, General Calderon was "calling all the shots." According to McDonough, Umana had no authority to make decisions or meet with donors and was basically relegated to the role of messenger for Calderon.

¶7. (C) In an additional example of the erosion of civilian oversight, Silvio Diaz was recently chastised by Umana by having "direct contact" with the army's Civilian Affairs branch while dealing with technical issues -- communication that he has maintained for the last 10 years without incident. Diaz explained that the army's Secretary General instructed Umana that all official communications between the Ministry and armed forces must pass through Umana to the Secretary General.

Comment: So Much for Civilian Control

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¶8. (C) Despite Tapia's unusual designation as "Secretary General with the rank of Minister" and her connections to the Presidency, she is unlikely to reassert the Ministry's authority over defense policy and oversight of the armed forces. Ortega has clearly acquiesced to the military's desire to allow the Ministry to fall into irrelevance. We have done what we can to support the Ministry's institutional position, such as including Ministry officials in relevant activities and senior-level visits, but Ministry will likely play no significant role in the Ortega administration.

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